

Romans 3:9-20—The Total Depravity of Mankind And The Purpose Of The Law

Memory Verse:

Romans 12:1-2 NKJV

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Introduction

Paul has gone to great length to show that all men are guilty. Creation, conscience, and the Law all say one thing to us—everyone is guilty of breaking God’s moral law. Some people’s sin is on display for all to see. Some people’s sin is justifying themselves by comparing themselves to others. And still others sin because they are so proud of their great knowledge of the Bible, yet they don’t do what it says—they are hearers and not doers, deceiving themselves (see James 1:22-25).

Now in Romans 3:9-20 Paul takes on the role of a physician who uses the Scriptures to give us the honest diagnosis of what our sinful human nature is really like; he shines the light of God’s law into our sinful human nature—the part of us that we try to hard to hide, the part of us that we don’t want anyone else to see. Be warned, you may not like what you see. Be ready for a reality check. Pray that God will give you a humble heart to accept what the Scriptures say as being true.

The total depravity of mankind

Outline:

1. The Conclusion: all are born guilty before God and controlled by the power of sin
2. The Old Testament describes the universal depravity and guilt of mankind
3. The law cannot save us from our sin and the penalty it deserves, it only reveals our sin

Romans 3:9-20 NKJV

⁹ What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin.

¹⁰ As it is written:

“There is none righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God.

¹² They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one.”

¹³ “Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit”; “The poison of asps is under their lips”;

¹⁴ “Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.”

¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

¹⁶ Destruction and misery are in their ways;

¹⁷ And the way of peace they have not known.”

¹⁸ “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. ²⁰ Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

1. The conclusion of chapters 2 and 3: all are born guilty before God and controlled by the power of sin

Romans 3:9 NKJV

What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin.

v 9 **Are we better than they? Not at all:** Since Paul was Jewish, the **we** refers to Paul and the rest of the Jews, and the **they** refers to the gentiles or non-Jewish people. Paul is making the point that the Jews are no better than anyone else; a shocking statement to make considering that the Jews thought of themselves as being so much better, and more highly favoured by God, than all other people.

v 9 **For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin:** This is the conclusion from chapters 2 and 3, where the three types of sinners are condemned; those who openly sin, the self-righteous hypocrite who compares himself to others, and those who pride themselves on knowing God's law but don't keep it. Which category or categories do you fit into?

v 9 **Under sin:** The Amplified Bible explains this as "held down by and subject to its power and control". It means to be a slave to sin, literally sold to sin—sin is my master. It means that everyone is born with sin as their master who has total control over them. To put it very simply—we are all born sinners and thus we sin; everybody is born with a natural tendency to sin.

"Under the power of sin, but chiefly under the guilt of sin." (Poole)

"He is regarding sin as a tyrant ruler, so that sinners are 'under' it (Jerusalem Bible, 'under sin's dominion'); they cannot break free." (Morris)

How did the human race become so depraved?

"**Under sin**" describes a hopeless and depressing situation. Because of Adam's rebellion against God, all of humanity is born with the natural tendency to sin, and will be punished for that sin. Remember that God created mankind in His own image, but after the fall, when Adam rebelled or sinned against God, that perfect image was completely corrupted. Therefore, since the fall, all people are not born in God's perfect image, but rather in the corrupted image of sinful Adam.

Genesis 5:1-3 NKJV

This is the book of the genealogy of Adam. **In the day that God created man, He made him in the likeness of God.** ² He created them male and female, and blessed them and called them Mankind in the day they were created. ³ And Adam lived one hundred and thirty years, **and begot a son in his own likeness, after his image,** and named him Seth.

Here are some of the verses that describe our sinful nature as being completely corrupted or totally depraved, and also completely opposite to the new nature that the believer receives *when they are born again* (see Ezekiel 11:19, 18:31, and 36:26):

Romans 7:14-20 NLT

So the trouble is not with the law, for it is spiritual and good. The trouble is with me, for [my old nature is] all too human, **a slave to sin**.¹⁵ [My new nature doesn't] really understand [my old nature], for [my new nature wants] to do what is right, but [my old nature doesn't] do it. Instead, [my old nature] does what [my new nature] hates.¹⁶ But if [my new nature knows] that what [my old nature is] doing is wrong, this shows that [my new nature agrees] that the law is good.¹⁷ **So [my new nature is] not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me [my old nature] that does it.**

¹⁸ **And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature.** [My new nature wants] to do what is right, but [my old nature] can't.¹⁹ [my new nature wants] to do what is good, but [my old nature doesn't]. [My new nature doesn't] want to do what is wrong, but [my old nature does] it anyway.²⁰ But if [my old nature] does what [my new nature doesn't] want to do, [my new nature is] not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me [my old nature] that does it.

Romans 7:18 AMP

For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot perform it. [I have the intention and urge to do what is right, but no power to carry it out.]

Romans 8:7-8 NLT

For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God's laws, and it never will.⁸ That's why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God.

Galatians 5:16-18 AMP

But I say, walk and live [habitually] in the [Holy] Spirit [responsive to and controlled and guided by the Spirit]; then you will certainly not gratify the cravings and desires of the flesh (of human nature without God).

17 For the desires of the flesh are opposed to the [Holy] Spirit, and the [desires of the] Spirit are opposed to the flesh (godless human nature); for these are antagonistic to each other [continually withstanding and in conflict with each other], so that you are not free but are prevented from doing what you desire to do.

18 But if you are guided (led) by the [Holy] Spirit, you are not subject to the Law [trying to please God using human effort].

There are at least four reasons why I need to know that my sinful nature is completely depraved or corrupted:

- 1. I must first understand my own moral depravity before I can appreciate God's holiness*
- 2. I will never come to the conclusion that I can't save myself until I understand that my sinful nature is completely and utterly depraved or corrupted by sin*
- 3. I will never understand grace until I see myself as being totally unworthy of being saved*
- 4. Understanding just how depraved I am is the only solution to my pride and my hypocritical comparative spirit that always wants to see myself as being better than others*

Paul will now go on in verses 10-20 to describe exactly just how bad the disease of sin is that has infected or corrupted all of mankind—he will show us just how great the fall was from mankind's state of innocence to sinner (Don't lose hope, the Good News, God's loving solution to this seemingly unsolvable problem is coming in verse 21).

2. The Old Testament describes the universal depravity and guilt of mankind

This is a head to toe examination of the human condition. Paul literally begins with the head (out thoughts, attitudes, and speech) and finishes with our feet (our actions or our walk). This is like an X-ray of the sinful human nature that we are all born with. Let's see what the following Old Testament Scriptures that Paul quotes reveal about what is really inside of each one of us.

Romans 3:10-18 NKJV

As it is written:

“There is none righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God.

¹² They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable [useless or corrupt]; there is none who does good, no, not one.” (Psalm 14:1-3)

¹³ “Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit”; (Psalm 5:9)

“The poison of asps is under their lips”; (Psalm 140:3)

¹⁴ “Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.” (Psalm 10:7)

¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

¹⁶ Destruction and misery are in their ways;

¹⁷ And the way of peace they have not known.” (Isaiah 59:7-8)

¹⁸ “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” (Psalm 36:1)

v 10 **There is none righteous [just], no, not one:** This is the opening summary statement. Everything that follows explains why we are not righteous. Verses 10 through 13 are from Psalm 14:1-3. It's very beneficial to read them in their context.

Psalm 14:1-3 NLT

Only fools say in their hearts, “*There is no God.*” They are corrupt, and their actions are evil; not one of them does good! ² The Lord looks down from heaven on the entire human race; he looks to see if anyone is truly wise, if anyone seeks God. ³ But no, all have turned away; all have become corrupt. No one does good, not a single one!

The first sentence in Psalm 14:1 is very revealing. The Hebrew language is literally “Fool, said in his heart, no God.” So the Biblical definition of a fool is someone who says “no” to God, someone who refuses to submit to God. It doesn't mean that they don't believe in God's existence. Rather, it means that they are refusing to obey God. Pride makes us think that we know better than God. Pride and it's resulting rebellion is the root of mankind's problem. Pride = sin = rebellion = foolishness.

No-one seeks God

v 11 **There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God:** Remember what we learned from Romans 3:4; “let God be true and every man a liar”. Many people claim to be seeking God, and from the outside it may look like they are, but they are not—“let God be true and every man a liar”—**There is none who seeks after God.** Unless a person is responding to the Holy Spirit as He convicts them of their sin and their need to believe in Jesus for salvation, they are seeking or worshipping an idol of their own making.

Because by nature my sinful nature hates God, it will never of its own accord seek to be made right with God. It's like the guilty thief never looks for a policeman. Instead, God first seeks us, then we respond to God. God finds us, we don't find God. We love God because God first loved us (see 1 John 4:19). People say that they found God. No. God found them, convicted them of their sin, and they humbled themselves and responded to God's invitation of salvation and forgiveness.

John 16:8-9 NLT

And when [the Holy Spirit] comes, **He will convict the world of its sin** ... ⁹ The world's sin is that it refuses to believe in Me [Jesus].

Luke 19:10 NKJV

For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.

John 4:23 NKJV

But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; **for the Father is seeking** such to worship Him.

Notice that it is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who are all seeking mankind.

So if people are not seeking God, then what are they seeking?

Even many people who call themselves Christians are not worshipping the true God; instead they worship a god that they have created in their own image, a god that they are comfortable with. For example, many people worship a god who wouldn't send anyone to hell, or a god who allows sins like homosexuality, or a god who is okay with them choosing what commands or responsibilities they feel comfortable obeying—instead of submitting themselves to all of God's commands.

Jon Courson comments.

The Great Physician's diagnosis of the condition of humanity is bleak: All are sinners without exception. This description is not just of the "bad guys"—but of you and me as well. Now, if I forget this divine diagnosis and start to think, He's a pretty good person, I'm setting myself up for disappointment and disillusionment. Therefore, instead of being surprised when someone does something bad, I should be amazed when someone does something good because the divine diagnosis is that we are all depraved.

"But what about the guy in the Philippines," you ask, "who whips his body and is hung on a Cross every Easter? Yes, his theology might be askew, but surely he is seeking God."

No, he's not. Paul says none seeks after God.

"What about the Tibetan monks who live their entire lives in simplicity and celibacy? Surely they're seeking after God."

No, they're not. The Bible says none seeks after God. ["let God be true and every man a liar"—Romans 3:4]

"Then what's the guy in the Philippines seeking?" you ask.

Perhaps he's seeking alleviation from his guilt, perhaps recognition from his peers, perhaps exaltation of his soul. But he's not seeking God.

"What about the monks in Tibet? What are they seeking?"

Perhaps they're seeking peace, perhaps some kind of transcendent emotional experience, perhaps a higher consciousness—but they're not seeking God.

The Bible says none seeks after God, no not one. Every believer was chosen solely by grace, completely because of God's unmerited, undeserved, unearned favour.

v 12 **They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable:** To understand what **unprofitable** means, think of *rotten fruit* that is so rotten that it is now useless or corrupted. It stinks and has become good for nothing and must now be thrown out.

There is none who does good, no, not one!

v 12 **There is none who does good, no, not one:** Here is where many get confused. For example, the atheist philanthropist says, “how can you say that my giving money to feed starving children is not “good”?”

There are two things that we need to understand regarding what God considers good:

1. **God is more concerned with “motive” or the “why” than the action itself**

Man looks at the outward action, but God looks at the heart, examining the motive behind the action. It’s not so much what I do, but rather why I do it that’s important to God.

Romans 2:16 AMP

On that day when, as my Gospel proclaims, God by Jesus Christ will judge men in regard to the things which they conceal (their hidden thoughts).

Ecclesiastes 12:14 NLT

God will judge us for everything we do, including every secret thing, whether good or bad.

1 Samuel 16:7 NKJV

But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

2. **Since God looks at our motive, what is the correct motive that is acceptable to God? Love**

Hebrews 11:6 AMP

But without faith it is impossible to please and be satisfactory to Him. For whoever would come near to God must [necessarily] believe that God exists and that **He is the rewarder of those who earnestly and diligently seek Him** [out].

Ephesians 6:7 NLT

Work with enthusiasm, as though you were working for the Lord [**God pleaser**] rather than for people [**Man pleaser**]. ⁸ Remember that the Lord will reward each one of us for the good we do, whether we are slaves or free.

We learn from the above two verses that we are to be motivated by a loving and grateful heart that desires to please God. We must seek our reward, our “well done”, from God (see Matthew 25:21), and not from people—we are to be “God pleasers” and not “man pleasers”. Also, as the three Scriptures below clearly show, the only motive that God accepts is *love*—love for God that also expresses itself in love towards others.

John 14:21 NLT

Those who accept my commandments and obey them are the ones who love me. And because they love me, my Father will love them. And I will love them and reveal myself to each of them.”

Philippians 1:15-17 NKJV

Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from goodwill: ¹⁶ The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; ¹⁷ **but the latter out of love**, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel.

1 Peter 1:22 NLT

You were cleansed from your sins when you obeyed the truth, **so now you must show sincere love to each other** as brothers and sisters. Love each other deeply with all your heart.

3. How do I determine what my true motive is?

Determining our true motive can be incredibly difficult. We can perform seemingly selfless acts towards someone but have a selfish motive; our heart can deceive us into thinking that we really are a nice person, when really we are completely selfish.

Jeremiah 17:9-10 NLT

“The human heart [the old sinful nature] is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is? ¹⁰ But I, the Lord, search all hearts and examine secret motives. I give all people their due rewards, according to what their actions deserve.”

My old nature thinks something like, “Wow, look at that nice thing I did for that other person—aren’t I just the most nicest and kindest person!” But think about it, how can a heart or nature that is by nature absolutely selfish, do anything that is unselfish or loving? It’s impossible. If I’m not walking in the Spirit—seeking my reward and praise from God, motivated by gratitude and love for God, and empowered by God—then I’m controlled by my sinful human nature and living for myself, and seeking the praise of man (I’m proud, self-centred, and a man-pleaser).

There are many selfish motives for doing things and even overcoming sin: it makes me feel good, I enjoy doing it, it makes me look good in the sight of others, it helps me to get what I want, I won’t be punished for breaking the law, I will get a reward, it gives me a sense of purpose and belonging, I feel accepted, I get to enjoy friendship, I get to enjoy a good marriage, I get to have children, etc. Notice that all these motives for doing something are selfish because they all revolve around “me” or “I”—they are all selfish motives. Remember that attitude is everything—in my heart, am I being selfish or unselfish?

I think of the example of an elder in a church. He comes to the pastor and asks him to pray for his son who is on drugs. The pastor looks at him and discerns that the elder is not so concerned about his son’s welfare, but rather his reputation in the church; *the elder was more concerned about his own reputation than he was for his son’s welfare.* The elder was humble enough to admit that this was the truth and he repented. He understood that he was being ruled by the sinful nature and was not walking in the Spirit. Again, let God be true and every man a liar. Even though we might not understand how and why everything the sinful nature does is evil in God’s eyes, we must take God’s word for it, because God doesn’t lie.

Our whole physical body has been corrupted

Paul now goes on to show the throat, tongue, lips, mouth, and feet have all been corrupted—all are under the control of the sinful nature unless a person is born again and walking or living according to the Spirit. We'll first look at another Scripture:

Galatians 5:24-26 NLT

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. ²⁵ Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, or provoke one another, or be jealous of one another.

v 13-17 **“Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit”; “The poison of asps is under their lips”; ¹⁴ “Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.” ¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ Destruction and misery are in their ways; ¹⁷ And the way of peace they have not known.”**: We all know just how easily we can destroy each other, both by the words which we speak and our actions. Look at what naturally proceeds from our sinful human nature: death, deceit, poison, cursing, bitterness, hate and murder, destruction, misery (distress and trouble), and an agitated and troubled spirit (a lack of peace). Here is the cure for our awful sinful human nature:

Colossians 3:1-10 NLT

Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honour at God's right hand. ² **Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth.** ³ For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory.

⁵ **So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you.** Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires. Don't be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world. ⁶ Because of these sins, the anger of God is coming. ⁷ You used to do these things when your life was still part of this world. ⁸ But now is the time to get rid of anger, rage, malicious behaviour, slander, and dirty language. ⁹ Don't lie to each other, **for you have stripped off your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds.** ¹⁰ **Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him.**

v18 **There is no fear of God before their eyes:** This isn't the “God's going to beat me with a big stick if I do anything wrong” kind of fear. Rather, it's the reverence and honour that an obedient and submissive young child has toward their parents—they love their parents, are submitted to their parents, and want to please their parents.

We must learn to see ourselves as little children who are loved, provided for, and protected by, their Heavenly Father. I need to be in awe of God and look up to Him. *If I am not doing this, then I am a rebellious child who has no respect for my heavenly Father; rather I am despising His authority and inviting His discipline.* Remember, “Let God be true and every man a liar”. If what I think about myself (example, I love God and am submitted to Him) doesn't match the fruit that I am producing (example, disrespect and independent living), then I need to humble myself, come to an honest opinion of myself, and repent. Jesus made this very clear:

Matthew 18:2-4 NLT

Jesus called a little child to him and put the child among them. ³ Then he said, “I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven. ⁴ So anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Matthew 18:2-4 AMP

And He called a little child to Himself and put him in the midst of them, ³ And said, Truly I say to you, unless you repent (change, turn about) and become like little children [trusting, lowly, humble, loving, forgiving], you can never enter the kingdom of heaven [at all].

⁴ Whoever will humble himself therefore and become like this little child [trusting, lowly, humble, loving, forgiving] is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

v 18 **No fear of God:** Every sin and rebellion against God happens because we do not have a proper respect for Him. Wherever there is **sin**, there is **no fear of God**. (David Guzik)

“In short, as it is a bridle to restrain our wickedness, so when it is wanting, we feel at liberty to indulge every kind of licentiousness.” (John Calvin)

3. The law cannot save us from our sin and the penalty it deserves, it only reveals our sin

Romans 3:19-20 NKJV

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. ²⁰ Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

v 19 **Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law:** The primary application here is to those who knew the law but didn't obey it. However, all people will be judged by God's moral law, and in that sense, all of mankind is **under the law**.

Remember that Paul has been shining the spotlight of God's perfect righteousness on our utterly depraved and completely corrupted sinful nature. Why did he do this? The answer is in the next part of the verse.

v 19-20 **That every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God... for by the law is the knowledge of sin:** Paul is pointing out the universal guilt of all mankind, that we are all guilty before God. If we are humble we will understand that we are completely unable to either save or change ourselves. Not even God bothers to do anything with our old nature—it's too far gone—He writes it off and gives us a new one instead—it's new for old! We need to learn to recognise the prideful and selfish fruit of our sinful nature (**by the law is the knowledge of sin**) and put it to death, instead of justifying the sin in our lives and continuing to live in it.

v 20 **For by the law is the knowledge of sin:** J.B. Phillip's paraphrase—“*it is the straight-edge of the Law that shows us how crooked we are.*”

“We may add, that though all the vices here enumerated are not found conspicuously in every individual, yet they may be justly and truly ascribed to human nature, as we have already observed.” (Calvin)

v 20 **Therefore, by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight:** We must be so careful to not be like the Jews who applied what the law says about our sinful nature and only applied it to the gentiles (non-Jewish people). We can do the same: we can take what the Scripture says about the total depravity of man and only apply it to others—this is hypocrisy and blindness.

v 20 **Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the Law is the knowledge of sin:** The Law cannot save us, just like a mirror cannot clean us. Nobody looks into the mirror, sees some dirt on their face, and then tries to use the mirror to remove the dirt. No, they use soap and water to remove the dirt on their face. *In the same way, God has given us the law so we can see how we fall short of His perfect standard in what we do, say, and think, but He has also given us His Spirit and cleansing Word to transform us into His image.*

2 Corinthians 3:18 AMP

And all of us, as with unveiled face, [because we] continued to behold [in the Word of God] as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are constantly being transfigured into His very own image in ever increasing splendor and from one degree of glory to another; [for this comes] from the Lord [Who is] the Spirit.

v 20 **Therefore, by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight:** *“Since the time of Adam and Eve, people have tried to justify themselves **by the deeds of the law**. In the Garden of Eden Adam tried to make himself presentable to God by making coverings out of fig leaves—and he failed. In Job, the oldest book of the Bible, the problem is presented clearly: how can a man be righteous before God? (Job 9:2). God makes part of the answer clear here through Paul—the answer is not in the performance of good works, in **the deeds of the law**.*

*How we need to deeply understand this—that **by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified [made right with God]!***

- *This means that the law, having been broken, now can only condemn us—it can never save us*
- *This means that even if we could now begin to perfectly keep the law of God it could not make up for past disobedience, or remove present guilt*
- *This means that keeping the law is not God’s way of salvation or of blessing under the New Covenant” (David Guzik)*

Next week we will learn about the solution to the problem of sin—how God freely justifies us, making us perfectly righteous in His sight.

Conclusion: Remembering why I need to know that my sinful nature is completely depraved or corrupted:

1. *I must first understand my own moral depravity before I can appreciate God’s holiness*
2. *I will never come to the conclusion that I can’t save myself until I understand that my sinful nature is completely and utterly depraved or corrupted by sin*
3. *I will never understand grace until I see myself as being totally unworthy of being saved*
4. *Understanding just how depraved I am is the only solution to my pride and my hypocritical comparative spirit that always wants to see myself as being better than others*